

Knowledge Management and Chief Knowledge Officers -- An Evaluation of Skills and Job Responsibilities

With the emergence of a knowledge-based economy, a new type of executive has surfaced in many organizations – the Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO). What is the role of the CKO in today's organization, and can librarians learn from this trend of information management in organizations?

Knowledge management

A relatively recent phenomenon, the CKO has materialized alongside the practice of knowledge management (KM). Harrod's (2000) defines KM as "The process of collecting, organizing, storing and exploiting the information and data that is held within an organization, particularly information known to individuals (tacit knowledge), as well as the general store of known information and data (explicit knowledge). The process depends on electronic storage and access, typically through an Intranet."

The CKO is responsible for managing intellectual capital and is custodian of KM practices in an organization.

Job responsibilities of the CKO

The responsibilities associated with the job function of CKO fall into three general categories: promoting the importance of knowledge sharing, creating a technical infrastructure to ease that sharing, and measuring the value of knowledge and KM practices to the organization. If the CKO leads a team of knowledge professionals, then they also assume managerial responsibility of their staff.

Evangelizing sharing:

Potentially the most important of the job functions is promoting a corporate culture that encourages knowledge sharing. A long-term proposition, the CKO works as a change agent to build a cultural climate that rewards sharing behaviour. (Earl & Scott, 1999) Real cultural change however, is a very difficult thing to accomplish. (Davenport & Prusak, 1997)

Because of the power associated with expertise, employees may be reluctant to share their knowledge and skill. "A person who has unique or special knowledge, skills and experience may use this expertise as a source of influence and a way of building personal power." (Gordon, 2002) The CKO argues against perceived reasons for hoarding knowledge, (Stewart, 1998) persuades workers that knowledge-sharing initiatives are to their benefit, (Earl & Scott, 1999) and uses motivational techniques to reward a sharing climate.

The CKO also creates an environment that makes it easier to build communication networks between employees who do not normally work together, but would generate value from exchanging information. (Earl & Scott, 1999) The CKO works with formal and informal communication networks and supports "communities of practice" or groups of experts who could learn from knowledge exchange. (Stewart, 1998)

Technical backbone:

Davenport and Prusak argue that these organizational changes will necessarily require changes to the information technology structure, since IT is the key enabler in leveraging intellectual capital. (1997) Having fostered a sharing culture, the CKO uses IT to create a structured means of knowledge exchange, and as a way of generating opportunities to connect workers together across organizational units and geographies. The CKO designs ways for workers to present and receive knowledge and is responsible for developing and maintaining an information infrastructure to harness the collective knowledge of the organization.

Not to be confused with the role of the Chief Information Officer, the CKO is interested in designing knowledge systems rather than with the hardware, software and wiring of the operations. (Earl & Scott, 1999) A CKO understands and enables IT technologies such as Intranets, teleconferencing, databases and groupware. The CKO uses the available technologies to harvest, distribute and leverage the most out of employee expertise.

Hard-nosed business sense:

While working to foster a cooperative culture and creating mechanisms to exchange knowledge, the CKO keep a sharp eye on the rewards of these endeavours. The CKO has a fierce business sense to contribute to the organization. “The CKO has to determine how better management of knowledge will help the firm make or save money, and must be able to document that connection.” (Davenport & Prusk, 1998) The results of KM activities must translate into real business value.

Lief Edvinsson, Director of Intellectual Capital at Skandia, and one of the first to hold a KM position, recognizes the importance of measuring intellectual capital. He concentrates on measuring the value of Skandia’s knowledge capital and has advocated changing accounting systems to reflect the intangible intellectual assets of a corporation. (Davenport & Prusk, 1998)

In business ventures, the bottom line is the measure of success to an organization. The CKO evaluates the return on investment before making cultural and design decisions and proceeding with KM initiatives.

CKO as manager:

A final function for many CKOs is that of manager to a team of knowledge professionals. Although not all CKOs have a team, Earl and Scott found that most have a small staff of three to 12 specialist working under their supervision. (1999) In addition to leading the management of intellectual capital in an organization, the CKO must therefore also supervise the work and careers of their employees.

Characteristics of the CKO

To accomplish the multifaceted tasks associated with leading an organization’s KM practice, the CKO must possess a combination of human relations skill, technical savvy and financial expertise. “The qualities required of the CKO are an unusual and perhaps rare mix.” (Earl & Scott, 1999)

Charisma

Earl and Scott, in a study of 20 CKOs in Europe and North America, found that “CKOs need to be sociable and energetic.” (1999) They must be able to manage relationships and build bridges between various groups and employees in an organization. CKOs possess “soft skills” to effectively communicate their vision and motivate others to support their vision. (Corcoran & Jones, 1997)

Technical savvy

Technology enables intellectual capital to be leveraged across an organization. The CKO must also be skilled at envisioning and executing technology plans company wide. (Corcoran & Jones, 1997) Consequently, CKOs have a high level of technical savvy and an understanding of existing and emerging technologies that facilitate capturing, storing and exchanging information. CKOs work closely with the IT team, and are able to communicate in their language.

Business know-how

In addition, CKOs have solid financial management skills with a demonstrated ability to manage budgets, understand corporate financing schemes and be able to grasp the financial considerations of decision-making. (Corcoran & Jones, 1997) CKOs are strategists in competitive business environments.

Leadership

CKOs are also credible leaders and possess entrepreneurial skills, embracing the challenge and risk of taking on a new function. (Earl & Scott, 1999) Much like the superleadership described by Gordon (2002), effective CKOs encourages workers to become self-leaders who take primary responsibility for getting involved in knowledge sharing as part of their job responsibilities.

If the CKO is also leader of a knowledge team, they must possess the core competencies required for a manager including adaptability, creativity, and sensitivity to intercultural issues. (Gordon, 2002)

Conclusion

There is no clear profile of a “typical” CKO, and no consistent qualifications exist for the function, although the job appears to appeal to a certain type of personality – one with a diverse background, organizational knowledge, leadership ability and enthusiasm for new challenges. (Earl & Scott, 1999) CKOs possess a rare combination of “hard” business skills and “soft” people skills, combined with vision, enthusiasm and political clout to make their vision a reality.

Similarly, the job does not exist in many companies worldwide. Among the first organizations to develop the position were the big six accounting firms. (Watt, 1997) Today, the job may be appropriate for any organization where knowledge is a critical business resource, (Davenport & Prusak, 1998) or where knowledge is itself embedded in the product. However, whether the role evolves into an institutionalized position in the corporate organizational chart or whether it is simply a passing trend is yet to be determined.

Whatever the future of the job title CKO, the trend of using knowledge as a primary competitive business tool is sure to gather speed. Librarians have many of the

skills identified as vital in KM, and are in a position to take a lead role in this new economy.

References

- Choo, C.W. (1998). *The knowing organization: How organizations use information to construct meaning, create knowledge, and make decisions*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Choo, C.W. (1998). *Information management for the intelligent organization: The art of scanning the environment*. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Corcoran, M., & Jones, R. (1997). Chief knowledge officers? Perceptions, pitfalls & potential. *Information Outlook*, 1(6), 30–36.
- Davenport, T.H., & Prusak, L. (1997). *Information ecology: Mastering the information and knowledge environment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davenport, T.H., & Prusak, L. (1998). *Working knowledge: How organizations manage what they know*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Earl, M.J., & Scott, I.A. (1999). Opinion: What is a Chief Knowledge Officer? [Electronic version]. *Sloan Management Review*. 40(2), 29-38.
- Gordon, J.R. (2002). *Organizational behavior: A diagnostic approach*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge creating company*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prytherch, R. (2000). *Harrod's Librarian's Glossary and Reference Book*. England: Gower Publishing Company Limited.
- Stewart, T.A. (1997). *Intellectual capital*. New York: Doubleday.
- Stewart, T.A. (1998). Is this job really necessary? *Fortune*, 137(1), 154-155.
- Watt, P. (1997). Knowing it all. [Electronic version]. *Network world*, 14(33), I17-S18.
- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. California: Sage Publications.